

Questions to Ask About Works You Are Studying

(Extracted from *Music in Words: A Guide to Researching and Writing About Music* by Trevor Herbert, The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 2001, U.K.)

- Who wrote the work and when and where was it first performed?
- Why was it written (perhaps for particular performances, or as a commission)? Is the music functional (dance or ceremonial music, for example)?
- Did the composer complete the work, or was it completed by someone else?
- Did the composer revise the work?
- Was it published during the composer's lifetime?
- Is the edition you are looking at the original version or a later edition?
- At what point in the composer's life and output was the piece written? Does it relate to or contrast with other pieces written at about the same time? How does it fit into the general creative output of the composer?
- Are there extra-musical factors concerning the composer's life that might be reflected in the piece?
- Does the title have significance? Is it just the name of a genre (sonata or concerto, for instance), or is the title more descriptive? Is the work programmatic—is it supposed to portray or evoke events and characters?
- How detailed are the performance instructions? Are the performance forces (names and quantities of instruments/voices) given? Are dynamics, tempi, accidentals and ornamentation specified? How much discretion is given to performers? Are they expected to understand unwritten conventions such as ornamentation?
- What was the reception of the work when it was first heard? Have there been different attitudes to or receptions of the piece subsequently?
- How or when does the work fit into a broad historical context? Does it respond to or reflect broad cultural or historical movements or events?
- How does the work fit into the development of repertoire for the forces (instruments or voices) for which it was written?